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# "IT'S NOW WE'VE CROSSED PEASE RIVER"

## THEMES OF VOYAGE AND RETURN IN TEXAS FOLK SONGS

KEN BAAKE

Stories of development from childhood to adulthood or of journeying through a life-changing experience to gain new knowledge are replete in oral and written tradition, as exemplified by the Greek epic of Odysseus and countless other tales. Often the hero journeys naively to an alien land and then, with great difficulty, returns home wiser but forever scarred. Such a journey can take the hero to a terrible place, from which he may escape physically, but from which he can never escape emotionally. The hardship of travel and its ensuing lessons is a common theme in human

narratives, its protean form identified repeatedly in world mythologies by scholar Joseph Campbell. According to Campbell, the hero comes in many forms, bearing "a thousand faces," but always with the same underlying experience—moving from a call to journey and often an initial refusal, then acceptance followed by a crossing of the threshold into temptation and atonement, finally leading to an eventual return bearing both scars and the wisdom of a transformative experience. As Campbell writes, "The hero has died as man—he has been reborn . . . to return then to us, transfigured, and teach us the lesson he has learned of life renewed."<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Booker's study of human storytelling offers the theme of "voyage and return" as one of the seven underlying plots of human narratives, although some of his other plots such as "overcoming the monster" and "the quest" also reveal strong traces of the heroic journey in them. For Booker, "the essence of the Voyage and Return story is that its hero or heroine (or the central group of characters) travel out of their familiar, everyday, 'normal' surroundings into another world completely cut off from the first, where everything seems

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To hear samples of Texas folk songs, see "Educational Resources" on the *Great Plains Quarterly* Web site: <http://www.unl.edu/plains/publications/GPQ/gpq.shtml>

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disconcertingly normal.”<sup>2</sup> We see this most vividly in Joseph Conrad’s late-nineteenth-century novel *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow, the narrator, pilots a ferry boat over the Congo River in search of Kurtz, a European ivory trader made bestial by his travels. He survives the journey but is plagued by his knowledge of human savagery. Kurtz fares worse, of course, dying on the boat while muttering about the horror of human nature. Implicit in this novel is the message that there exists some line, geographical, psychological, or otherwise, that cannot be crossed without forever transforming the traveler.

Because the Great Plains has often been portrayed as vast, wind tormented, desiccated, without succor of trees and nurturing meadows, and because it represents in American mythology the wide border between homelands and the dangerous frontier, it has been the setting for many narratives of a heroic crossing over and return. Members of Stephen Long’s expedition of 1820 offered some of the first non-native written accounts of crossing the Southern Plains, forever implanting the image of desolation.<sup>3</sup> Zoologist Thomas Say reported that expedition members saw the Southern Plains as a “trackless desert which still separated [them] from the utmost boundary of civilisation.”<sup>4</sup> When historian Frederick Jackson Turner later (1894) identified the frontier as “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization”—he was essentially proclaiming it to be a region of trial for America’s heroes.<sup>5</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American history is cast with characters who, like Long’s group, accepted that call. Indeed, much of the celebratory history of America’s uniqueness or “exceptionalism” is a retelling of the crossing-over story by scores if not a thousand faces.

#### NATURALIST STORIES ON THE GREAT PLAINS

Not surprisingly, this theme of crossing a line between innocence and baptism into life’s travails is the essence of much folklore

and many musical folk ballads<sup>6</sup> of the Great Plains and the American West. My premise is that such narratives retain power over the American psyche today even if the actual words and songs are seen merely as quaint artifacts of cultural history. Thus, I align my position with literary scholar Lauren Berlant’s classification of frontier themes as nothing less than a “national symbolic,” comprising “images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate throughout personal/collective consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> Sara Spurgeon extends Berlant’s analysis to reveal a “national fantasy” that deifies the iconic image of the frontier, the “figure of the sacred cowboy,” which shows no sign of losing power to shape national culture.<sup>8</sup>

Resistance to the power of the cowboy archetype characterized much of the criticism of the foreign policy of U.S. president George Bush. We may no longer sit around the campfire singing about the adventures of the Texas Rangers protecting the Texas frontier, but our cultural mythos has not relinquished those stories. When Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, in 2009 gave the order for Navy sharpshooters to kill Somali pirates holding an American hostage or for drone planes to attack terrorists on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the cowboy mythos born more than one hundred years earlier continued its work. Clearly those Asiatic or Horn of Africa border regions represent the modern frontier between government and lawlessness, but they have not entirely replaced the Great Plains in evoking such symbolism. Dando points out that current news accounts of the depopulation and the so-called death of agriculture on the Great Plains today heralds a revived frontier consciousness within the United States, a reaffirmation of the Plains as a hostile region on the other side of the line. Dando writes, “I believe frontier is being recast in the American popular imagination from a border or transition at the *advance* of civilization to that of a landscape with low population densities, filled with wildlife and Native Americans, from which civilization has *retracted*.”<sup>9</sup>

It is probably not a coincidence that folklorists such as John Lomax, Carl Sandburg,

and Howard Thorpe recorded in writing many of the traditional Texas and Western songs and stories about the frontier in the early part of the twentieth century. This was a time when “naturalistic” literature in America and elsewhere offered an unvarnished image of reality that was the setting for a Darwinist struggle for survival by its characters—this drama itself was a narrative updating of the epic Old Testament struggle by God’s chosen men for Israel’s survival on a harsh landscape among relentless enemies.<sup>10</sup> In that Old Testament mythos, nature was the beguiling manifestation of the Phoenician fertility god Baal, who might draw man’s attention away from the God of Israel.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly the recording of oral narratives in American folk songs steeped in biblical heritage (and the writing of new narratives in the same vein by identified lyricists in the early years of the last century) codified a worldview dominant at the time: nature was harsh and uncowed by the will of man.

Understandably, then, the settler from the East in the traditional “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie” offers up his dying wish to be buried on the sylvan hillsides of his native land amid family members rather than on the desolate prairie. But alas, as with many characters in these travel tales, he cannot return home even in death, but instead is buried in a “narrow grave just six by three,” an insignificant mound on a vast plain where the coyotes will howl over him.<sup>12</sup> The author of this ballad was said to have reworked an earlier English seafarer’s song whose lament was that he might be buried in the deep sea. The reworking blends Romantic imagery with more stark naturalistic images, where roaming cowboys (read those who also are existentially lost) “fling a handful of roses” over his narrow grave and its bones.

The Great Plains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often described in naturalistic terms as an area that is expansive and intimidating; “nonirrigable” as the U.S. Geological Society report from Willard D. Johnson proclaimed in 1900.<sup>13</sup> Somewhere

around the 100th meridian the trees, lush grasses, and the life-giving waters of the great river valleys yield to short grasses, parched land, wild animals, and an unending canopy of relentless sun. Color choices on maps of the Great Plains subtly convey this line of warning even today. One example is found in the Web page of the Great Plains Network Consortium, a computer software group, in which a clear line exists between the Edenic green of the East and hellish deep brownish red of the interior lands.<sup>14</sup> Green being the color of living vegetation and brown the color of dead, such color gradients are not surprising or necessarily symbolic of a line between heaven and hell. Still, the visual impact of such maps of the U.S. interior is striking.

Staged on this clearly delineated set is the repeated theme or rhetorical commonplace in literature and folk songs of westward migration where—like Adam and Eve—the adventurer will pay for the sin of crossing over into forbidden land and, in essence, be stripped of bliss. Or he may create his own physical and emotional hell in the new land, as Kurtz did in *Heart of Darkness*. For example, one folk song that goes by as many names and settings as there were frontier lands in the nineteenth century reveals that the traveler clearly found a hell he was not bargaining for—in this case, it was the Dakotas:

We’ve reached the land of desert sweet,  
Where nothing grows for man to eat;  
The wind it blows with feverish heat  
Across the plains so hard to beat.<sup>15</sup>

Alternate endings to these stories provide salvation and rebirth for the protagonist who is lucky enough to be able to venture into the wild and return. These variations recall Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the nineteenth-century British Romantic poem in which bad luck befalls the sailors after one shoots the albatross, leaving only the narrator who did the shooting alive at the end to return and offer his tale as a warning against such misdeeds.

## CHASTENED BY THE WILDERNESS

A Great Plains example of a narrator who transgresses but escapes with his life is the traditional cowboy song *The Buffalo Hunters*. Here the narrator joins the hunting team sometime in the 1870s in the Texas town of Jacksboro—presumably located just this side of hell. The song depicts the savage extermination of the buffalo and was adapted from earlier versions in which hell was the Maine forests where lumberjacks toiled or, even earlier, the Atlantic Ocean, over which European settlers crossed to the mysterious New World.

In *The Buffalo Hunters* the other side is across the Pease River, where “our troubles did begin,” where death lay waiting as it does across the ancient River Styx. The narrator is enticed into joining the hunting venture by the leader “Crego,” whose offer is to “spend one summer pleasantly on the range of the buffalo.” Instead of ease and bounty, the men face hardships of Indian attacks, rancid food, fleas, gypsy water (that is, alkaline and tinged with gypsum), flesh wounds, and ultimately, betrayal by Crego. Only after killing him almost as a sacrifice and “leaving his damned old bones to bleach” are they able to hobble back from the range of the buffalo, forever chastened not to cross back over again. In this story the only salvation is to try to return from hell scarred but wiser, and ready to confess one’s sins to others who might be so tempted to cross to the other side:

Oh, it’s now we’ve crossed Pease River, and  
homeward we are bound,  
No more in that hell-fired country shall  
ever we be found.  
Go home to our wives and sweethearts, tell  
others not to go,  
For God’s forsaken the buffalo range and  
the damned old buffalo.<sup>16</sup>

Several illustrations of the buffalo hunt from the late nineteenth century reinforce the idea that hunters crossed a physical and even psychological line when they pursued their prey. William T. Hornaday, a zoologist at the

National Museum (Smithsonian Institution) in 1886 led a group to the Montana Plains to chronicle the buffalo extermination. His report to the museum includes an illustration adapted from a painting by J. H. Moser (Fig. 1) in which the hunter is taking aim at the buffalo in his gun sights. The hunter appears sneaky, serpentine, lying prostrate amid rocks and weeds on the mesa—a cunning predator availing himself of the innocent life below. Another illustration in the report unveils a similar panoramic sweep over the Plains, but with the hellish foreground littered by bones of the dead bison, the background a more serene, potentially redemptive river valley.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, where there are lines the hunter can also find himself on the wrong side, playing the part of the hunted. Memoirs of nineteenth-century Texas pioneer John Holland Jenkins recount tales of “Indian depredation,” a term that itself suggests a line across which the sinew and teeth of evil await to prey upon the innocent. Recounting a northward expedition from Texas to the Santa Fe Trail, Jenkins reports that General Hugh McLeod crossed the Brazos River and three forks of the Trinity River, and thus into danger. “Now their troubles commenced,” Holland writes, using virtually the same expression as found in *The Buffalo Hunters*. “At first a few stragglers were surprised and killed by the Indians, and once they faced about two hundred warriors, well-mounted and armed with bows and arrows.”<sup>18</sup> To European Americans entering their strange realm, Native Americans could appear devilish, as they clearly do springing around the fire on taut birdlike legs in Thrall’s 1879 “Indian War Dance” book illustration (Fig. 2).<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, nineteenth-century adventurer and historian Francis Parkman sensed similar unease in his account of *The Oregon Trail*. Looking ahead to further travel across the Plains, Parkman writes of the first day:

Accordingly, our preparation being now complete, we attempted one fine morning to begin our journey. The first step was an unfortunate one. No sooner were

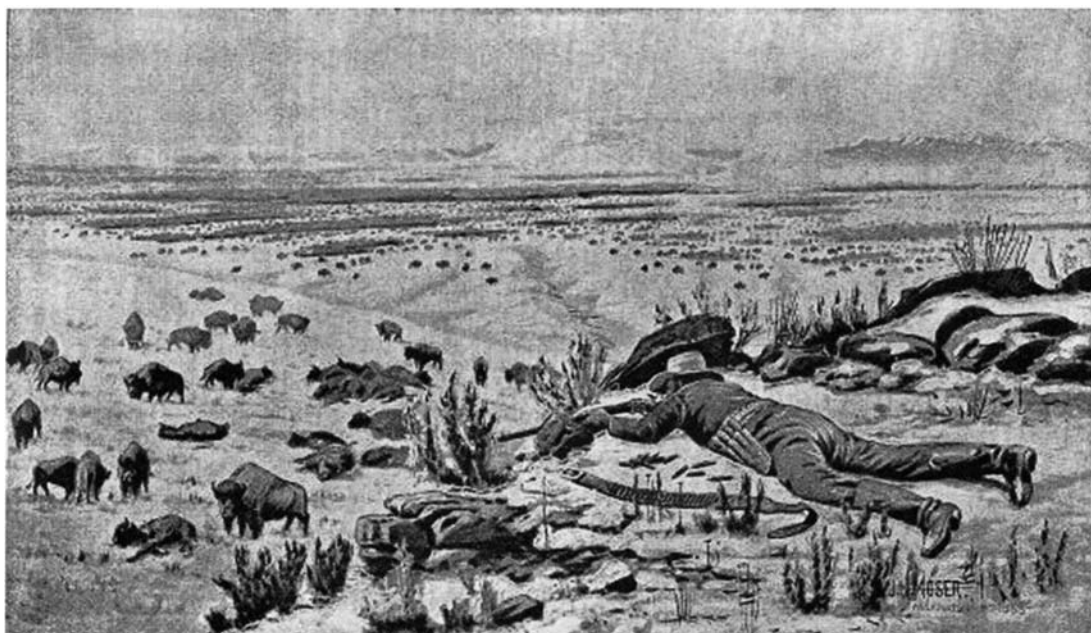


FIG. 1. Drawing from W. T. Hornaday, *The Extermination of the American Bison*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1889). <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17748> (Image #17, accessed June 2, 2010).

our animals put in harness than the shaft-mule reared and plunged, burst ropes and straps, and nearly flung the cart into the Missouri. . . . This foretaste of prairie experience was very soon followed by another. Westport was scarcely out of sight when we encountered a deep muddy gully, of a species that afterward became but too familiar to us, and hence for the space of an hour or more the cart stuck fast.<sup>20</sup>

Campbell recounts exotic tales of ogres who—like the buffalo hunters' Crego—lure reluctant young men across the line with promise of plenty, appealing to their lust both for adventure and its sensual or material gain. A subtheme is that the ogre's promises confound the traveler's common sense and, predictably, lead to his doom. In one such story, a caravan leader in India wisely carries large water vessels or "chatties" into "a waterless demon wilderness."<sup>21</sup> Conjuring visions of oases on the horizon, the ogre convinces the leader to smash the vessels to lighten his load, having then

only to wait for the caravan group to weaken in the desert where its members can be slain and devoured.

Travel and crossing over is, of course, a prominent theme in the spiritual and secular folk songs of African Americans, who were forcibly carried across the Atlantic in slave ships from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. The weary narrator in "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" implores a band of God's angels to carry the narrator home to heaven, which sometimes is associated with freedom back in Africa, far away from the hell of slavery. Other songs in the African American folk tradition welcome the test of faith that comes with a journey into dangerous lands. Echoing the story of Christ's temptation by Satan, the slave song "Go in the Wilderness" asserts that "If you want to find Jesus, go in the wilderness."<sup>22</sup> Of course such a quest is dangerous. Campbell quotes Puritan preacher Cotton Mather, who refers to the wilderness as populated with "fiery flying serpents," "droves of devils," and "bands of robbers."<sup>23</sup>





INDIAN WAR DANCE.

FIG. 2. "Indian War Dance" from Homer S. Thrall. *Pictorial History of Texas, from the Earliest Visits of European Adventurers, to A.D. 1879*. (St. Louis, Mo.: N.D. Thompson), Sequence 355, *The Portal to Texas History, Hosted by the University of North Texas Libraries*. <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph5828> (accessed June 2, 2010).

In an African American spiritual found in Texas in the 1940s titled "Travelin' Shoes," the river of death actually pursues the narrator, rising first to his ankles and eventually to his chin. The narrator escapes after pleading that he has not fulfilled his duty on earth, has not earned his "travelin' shoes." His mother, however, has her shoes and is ready to make the journey in his place.<sup>24</sup> This, of course, reprises the Christian passion narrative in which Christ's sacrifice substitutes for our own. Implicit in all stories of travail and hardship is the message that by reading or listening to the tale, one might be spared from making a similar misstep.

Within any complex literary theme, however, is embodied its opposite; thus, wilderness can be redemptive and nurturing. Even

the story of the original sin of Adam and Eve can be read as a transgression against the innocent succor of nature. Philosopher and religious studies scholar Max Oelschlaeger offers one of interpretation of the Fall of Man narrative in which the sins of Adam and Eve lead to their banishment from the Garden of Eden (presumably wild but bountiful) to a starker world that requires the hard work of agriculture for survival.<sup>25</sup> Folk songs as a corpus do little to resolve this ambiguity over whether wilderness is purifying or poisonous to the soul. As Texas folk-song scholar Robert G. Weiner writes, "Cowboy songs of the late nineteenth-century reflect an oral tradition among Western ranch hands that both glorified and condemned the natural environment in which they lived."<sup>26</sup> Thus, countering fear of being buried on the lone prairie is desire for a home "where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play."<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Turner's description of the frontier as a line of savagery are Jenkins's memoirs in which West Texas is portrayed as the land of "milk and honey," a place "where nothing could be more beautiful than the broad plains covered with wild rye and the finest grass the world ever afforded."<sup>28</sup>

#### THE OTHER SIDE: ENTRANCING, BUT DANGEROUS

Similarly, literary representations of the border between Texas and Mexico, and of the mysterious foreign land on the other side, are equally ambiguous and at times contradictory. Literary scholar Daniel Cooper Alarcón captures the contradictory view of Mexico in the European American literary mind with his representation of Mexico as an "infernal paradise," an "appropriate site on which to stage the drama of an Englishman's struggle between the powers of darkness and light."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Graham Greene, and Malcolm Lowry present an evolving portrait of Mexico as a land of mystery, savagery, spiritual adventure, and even self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>30</sup>

*All the Pretty Horses*, the first novel of Cormac McCarthy's border trilogy, tells a story of three companions crossing into Mexico, a land of awesome lightning storms, horse thieves, and killing. When the wounded lead character, John Grady, returns to Texas, he finds his father has died and his ranch home has been sold. For some, this is a story of man's solitude in an uncaring universe. Spurgeon, however, reads in McCarthy's novel not so much existential bleakness as unfolding self-awareness. John Grady's experience seeking paradise and finding a kind of hell delivers him from "a mythic construct that hides from him the true nature of the world."<sup>31</sup>

Early-twentieth-century singing cowboy Powder River Jack might have warned idealists like Grady that adventure can temper a man with the flames of hell. In the opening stanzas to his poem "Roulette Kate," set to music by Skip Gorman in 1996, the narrator warns women especially to stay away from the Mexican border, "a place for men, but not for the female breed." The poem tells of "entrancing lust," "cabaret lights," and passion running unrestrained in a haze of liquor and marijuana. Mexico changes a man, as it did Grady, but the result is not self-awareness as much as a bestial transformation:

There's many a derelict seeped in sin,  
What once was pure as a child;  
But their morals drain with border stain  
That leaves them tough and wild.<sup>32</sup>

Modern ballad music of Texas continues to post words of warning to the young and idealistic, with stories of traveling from safety to danger and back. In the song "Shades of Gray" by singer songwriter Robert Earl Keen, the line is the Red River separating Texas from Oklahoma. Three teenaged boys drive into Oklahoma with whiskey and homegrown marijuana on an escapade that has them stealing a cow and selling it, only to be tracked down and then released by state police who take pity on their "sorry" state. The police chief, a featureless black man who looms over them bathed in

the spotlight of a circling helicopter, is a God-the-Father figure offering the boys atonement, which in Campbell's analysis would mean the opportunity to become *at one* with that Father by renouncing sin.<sup>33</sup> Chastened and presumably wiser, they cross back to safety in Texas. As in the *Bildungsroman* genre in which a young person grows up over the course of the novel and comes to terms with societal expectations, these characters are now prepared to meet their fate like men:

They left us by the roadside  
Downhearted and alone.  
Randy got behind the wheel  
Said boys I'm going home.  
We turned around to face our fate  
Hung over but alive, on that  
Morning in Oklahoma, late April 1995.<sup>34</sup>

This song recalls the great era of the railroad ballad, when journeys on trains often carried an allegorical meaning of a crossing into dangerous or forbidden lands. In the opening to Dorothy Scarborough's tale *The Wind*, later adapted to a silent movie starring Lillian Gish, the heroine traveling by train from pastoral Virginia encounters an ever-more forbidding land visible outside the window. Surfacing out of the darkness into the pale light thrown off by the train amid blowing dust are desiccated animal bones. Inside the train, a man with a face of almost melodramatic devilish features plots to court the helpless woman. She eventually goes mad in her homestead from the wind.<sup>35</sup>

Like the down and out characters in Scarborough's or Keen's adventures, the Texas cowboy of the late nineteenth century passes out on the barroom floor and rides "The Hell-Bound Train," barely escaping with his life. With a boiler filled with beer and "the devil himself" as the engineer, the train careens further and further into a wild country as sulfur fumes scorch the passengers' faces. The cowboy awakens from his horrible drunkard's dream, which has culminated with the Devil's threats, and like Keen's characters, promises never to sin again:



Your flesh will scorch in the flames that  
 roar  
 And my imps will torment you forevermore.  
 Then the cowboy awoke with an anguished  
 cry.  
 His clothes were wet and his hair stood  
 high.  
 Then he prayed as he never had prayed  
 before,  
 To be saved from his sins and from hell's  
 front door;  
 His prayers and his pleadings were not in  
 vain,  
 For he never rode on that hell-bound train.<sup>36</sup>

#### INTERMINABLE WANDERING: WHEN THE HERO CANNOT RETURN

In some cases, however, Texas is not the safe haven to nurture one after a near-fatal adventure in the wild. The song "Hell in Texas," said to have been collected by the proprietor of the Buckhorn Saloon in San Antonio in 1909, is a whimsical tale of the Devil's negotiations with God for a plot of land that would be even more hellish than Hell itself, a place "where he could torment the souls of men." The Lord offers him an unwanted tract of sand that he doubted even the Devil could use, "down on the Rio Grande," where the water causes dysentery and "smells like bad eggs," the trees and cattle all have outsized thorns, the rattlesnakes and scorpions lay waiting for victims, and food is unpalatable because of Mexican spices.<sup>37</sup> "Hell in Texas" seems to advocate a sense of humor and good-natured acceptance of life's hardships rather than any quest for deliverance from them, but its underlying motif is that geography and all the actions that unfold upon it are divided between the hospitable and inhospitable. A postcard (Fig. 3) of the song highlights the divide: at the top are blue sky and clouds blanketing what could almost be "purple mountain majesties," to borrow the words of wonderment from "America the Beautiful." The bottom, by contrast, is yellowish orange, populated with cactus, a snake, a vulture, and other infernal creatures. Inset into



FIG. 3. An undated postcard, probably from the early 1960s based on the 4 cent stamp on the back, with the lyrics to "Hell in Texas."

the top quadrant, but clearly excerpted from the bottom, is a longhorn skull.

Like death's waters in "Travelin' Shoes," Hell sometimes finds the narrator of a folk song. The only thing to do is flee, as we see in Woody Guthrie's well-known 1940 Dust Bowl song, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh." Here presumably the narrator is innocent of any sin but is a victim nonetheless:

I've sung this song, but I'll sing it again,  
 Of the place that I lived on the wild windy  
 plains,  
 In the month called April, county called  
 Gray,  
 And here's what all of the people there say:  
 So long, it's been good to know yuh;

So long, it's been good to know yuh;  
 So long, it's been good to know yuh.  
 This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home,  
 And I got to be driftin' along.<sup>38</sup>

Alas, escape from life's trials—which can often approach the hellish—is not always possible. Like the dying pioneer who wants only to be buried back home rather than on the lone prairie, the narrator in West Texan Butch Hancock's story of lament on the Texas Plains of the late twentieth century can only dream of escape from his privations. He is not as fortunate as his churchly brethren; most likely his misfortune is not because his sins are greater than theirs (as evidenced by their glut-tony for big cars), but because of his bad luck as a dryland farmer who lives by the whims of nature rather than by dominating it through irrigation:

There's some big ol' Buicks at the Baptist  
 church,  
 Cadillacs at the Church of Christ.  
 I parked my camel by an ol' haystack.  
 I'll be lookin' for that needle all night.  
 There ain't gonna be no radial tires  
 Turnin' down the streets of gold.  
 I'm goin' down to the railroad tracks  
 And watch them lonesome boxcars roll.<sup>39</sup>

Ironically, the inability to cross a line may represent the most common state for a character drawn in the folk tradition. Like the protagonist in Hancock's song, who is condemned to merely watch the movement of railroad cars without being able to move himself, a character embedded in a movie in "Brownsville Girl," Bob Dylan's opus of journey across the plains of Texas, is forever condemned to a purgatory caught between life and death. This character, "a lonely kid trying to make a name for himself," shoots a heroic cowboy in the back, but instead of fame is damned to a life in the margins of unresolved tormenting twilight. "Let him go, let him say he outdrew me fair and square," the dying cowboy says. "I want him to feel what it's like every moment to face his death."<sup>40</sup>

Booker's analysis of the seven basic plots of human storytelling sheds light on the kinds of stories Dylan tells in "Brownsville Girl," in which a character is forever tormented. The "lonely kid" in this particular "dark version" of the voyage-and-return plot is unable to return; thus, he is left to wander interminably and contemplate his death. A similar fate without the wandering awaits Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, when he awakens to find he has crossed the line from human to having become a hideous insect. Gregor is held in his room by his family until he eventually dies—never offered redemption and the chance to return. For Booker, the various structures underlying stories that humans plot all converge around one of two outcomes. In the first, redemptive or comedic variation, the hero who has crossed the line in an egoistic quest for self-assertion is able to learn from his mistake and return with greater humility—experiencing a kind of rebirth. In the second, or tragedy, the hero's ego-aggrandizing quest leads to his destruction.

The narrator in Dylan's modern-day folk ballad is also caught between worlds, in this case one real and the other a movie in which actor Gregory Peck plays the mortally wounded cowboy. This narrator, who compresses the vast space of Texas into a few symbolic cities, realizes that occasionally one must accept the call to journey in order to have a unique enlightening experience in life: "Now, I've always been the kind of person that doesn't like to trespass, but sometimes you just find yourself over the line. Oh, if there's an original thought out there I could use it right now."<sup>41</sup>

Unlike the character in his story—the lonely kid condemned to purgatory—the narrator of "Brownsville Girl" learns life's lessons, among them that reality is at times mundane and at times full of tricks. Such deceit is obvious when the narrator, speaking in the song of a Texas Panhandle character, reveals that "the only thing we knew for certain about Henry Porter is that his name wasn't Henry Porter." Yet even if life is tricky and its meaning disguised, its value lies in the journey and the crossing of

boundaries—so long as the traveler is receptive to enlightenment and not possessed of a blinding, gluttonous ego. Dylan celebrates the value of continual journeys toward enlightenment in the final verse where the narrator once again is reflecting upon the Gregory Peck movie, noting, “I think I sat through it twice.”<sup>42</sup>

#### LIVING BETWEEN “DIRT AND THE DIVINE”

In summary, many folk songs have a narrator who is tormented in a hellish land. In many such songs, the trip to the forbidden land is an allegory of sin, payback for the free will of the fallen narrator. In others, the onset of hell is inevitable, perhaps a test of the character's spirit and righteousness. But in some cases, a life of suffering is simply borne at the hand of fate. The options are to flee with only your newfound wisdom and chastity, laughing it off, or if all else fails, dreaming it away. Certainly the cowboy's life on the Great Plains and Western frontier could be a dreary one, as in the song written down by Thorpe and other folklorists.<sup>43</sup> But it could also be a life that allowed one to face heroic challenges. So in writing about the “infernal paradise” south of border, Alarcón casts Mexico as “a spiritual testing ground, a symbolic landscape through which the outsider could achieve higher consequences and salvation, even while succumbing to a tragic end.”<sup>44</sup>

Straddling a line without crossing it can be the true if ultimately impossible test for the hero. Singer Johnny Cash is only heroic in “I Walk the Line”<sup>45</sup> because he knows the dangerous but enticing possibilities that lie on the other side—and he rejects them, at least in that song. The power of the Judeo-Christian narratives lies in their positioning the characters straddling that line. Thus, when theological scholar Mark Biddle explains the presence of sin as disequilibrium in the system of human society, he is in essence mapping out the dangerous and turbulent region that the hero must navigate, paradoxically, between lifeless safety and ever-threatening death. We really have no choice. Biddle writes, “Human beings properly inhabit the realm between the dirt and the

divine.”<sup>46</sup> What better setting to test characters in that symbolic realm than the Great Plains—a carpet of endless yellow land under a canopy of endless blue sky.

This enticing realm that folk songs and narratives have long depicted holds the risks of torment—consider the buffalo range—or of unbearable solitude, as the windswept prairie with its mournful coyote howls. “Jesus walked this lonesome valley,” the African-American spiritual tells us. “No one else could walk it for him.”<sup>47</sup> And no one can walk it for those of us who find ourselves drawn to the still-powerful archetypes of American folk tradition, compelled for whatever reason to sometimes cross the line.

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#### NOTES

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: MJF Books, 1949), 20.
2. Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London: Continuum, 2004), 87.

3. The route began at Fort Atkinson in what is now eastern Nebraska along the Platte River, descending into present-day Colorado and New Mexico, and then back east across the Texas Panhandle into Oklahoma.

4. Kevin S. Sweeney, "Wither the Fruited Plain: The Long Expedition and the Description of the 'Great American Desert,'" *Great Plains Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2005): 105. Sweeney notes that dendrochronological data (tree-ring data) reveal a drought in the Southern Plains from 1818 to 1820, which would have made the region seem especially inhospitable to Easterners used to a lush environment (111).

5. Frederick J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), 200.

6. Determining what counts as a folk ballad, a type of folk song, is not as easy as it might seem. The definition of a folk song has been the subject of more than a little debate among folklorists for as long as the field of study has existed. The key point of contention has been over the song's origins. Brunvand covers the debate in chapter 10 of his widely circulated folklore textbook. He cites traditional narrow views, which held that a folk song must be an anonymous lyrical poem with a melody, one that originated among "unlettered" people of the past. Others have suggested that these songs typically had their origins in the British Isles. Looser views suggest any song that sounds "folksy" or having its origins in oral tradition could be considered a folk song. Brunvand arrives at what he sees as the essence of any folk song: it must have "fluidity in form and content" in contrast to art songs or popular songs that remain fixed as composed and often recorded (153). Typically a folk song will be perpetuated orally even if it, at some time, was composed by an individual—an extended definition that allows for songs such as those written by Woody Guthrie or Bob Dylan to be considered having passed into the folk repertoire. Oscar Brand writes in this same loose vein that some songs written by college professors, medical doctors, or musical composers could count as folk songs. Citing the now-defunct International Folk Music Council, Brand ascribes folk-song status to any song that has "weathered the process of oral tradition" (5). The basic definition of a ballad is less problematic—a narrative folk song, one that tells a story (Brunvand, 176). Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers: Rise of the Modern Folk Song* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1962).

7. Berlant, quoted in Sara L. Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 10.

8. *Ibid.*, 41.

9. Christina E. Dando, "Deathscapes, Topocide, Domicide: The Plains in Contemporary Print Media," *Great Plains Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2009): 108.

10. Examples of American naturalist writing include *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser's novel of the loss of female innocence to uncompromising city life; *Octopus*, Frank Norris's account of the conflict between a California farmer and a railroad corporation; *The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane's short Civil War novel; and the Yukon stories of Jack London.

11. The stories of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in the biblical book of 1 Kings are especially strong reminders of the first lesson of scripture from the Garden of Eden—that Yahweh, the God of Israel, decrees severe punishment for those seduced by nature.

12. Traditional, "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," in *Songs of the Great American West*, ed. Irwin Silber (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 200-202.

13. Willard D. Johnson, "The High Plains and Their Utilization," in *Report of the U.S. Geological Survey*, vol. 21, pt. 4, 1900 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 653.

14. "GPN Extending the Reach Project Home Page," Great Plains Network, <http://archie.csce.uark.edu/gpn/> (accessed May 9, 2009).

15. Traditional, "Dakota Land," by John A. Dean (words) and traditional (music) in Silber, *Songs of the Great American West*, 233-34.

16. Traditional, "The Buffalo Hunters," in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, collected and ed. J. A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 335-38.

17. William T. Hornaday, "The Extermination of the American Bison" from the *Report of the National Museum*, 1886-87, pages 369-548, and plates I-XXII (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1889). Project Gutenberg: release date, February 10, 2006 [EBook #17748, Image #17], <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17748> (accessed June 2, 2010).

18. John Holmes Jenkins III, ed., *Recollections of Early Texas: The Memoirs of John Holland Jenkins* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 121.

19. Homer S. Thrall, *Pictorial History of Texas, from the Earliest Visits of European Adventurers, to A.D. 1879*. (St. Louis: N.D. Thompson), Sequence 355, Portal to Texas History, hosted by the University of North Texas Libraries, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph5828> (accessed June 2, 2010).

20. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2002), 6.

21. Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 84.

22. Traditional, "Go in the Wilderness" in *Slave Songs of the United States*, ed. William Francis

Allen, 1830-89; Charles Pickard Ware, 1840-1921; and Lucy McKim Garrison, 1842-77 (New York: A. Simpson, 1867), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/allen/menu.html> (accessed June 8, 2009).

23. Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 126.

24. Traditional, "Travelin' Shoes," in *Texas Folk Songs*, ed. William A. Owens, Texas Folklore Society Publication 23 (Dallas: SMU Press, 1967), 172-73.

25. Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 31.

26. Robert G. Weiner, "Cowboy Songs and Nature in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2006), 152.

27. Traditional, "Home on the Range," in *Songs of the American West*, ed. Richard E. Lingenfelter and Richard A. Dwyer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 446-47.

28. Jenkins, *Recollections of Early Texas*, 18. Canada's plains also have been represented in contradictory imagery—at times a biblical desert wasteland hostile to the wisdom of God and at other times a garden of opportunity. Reverend John West in his early-nineteenth-century descriptions of present-day Winnipeg wrote that "thousands are involved in worse than Egyptian darkness around me, wandering in ignorance and perishing through lack of knowledge" [quoted in R. Douglas Francis, "From Wasteland to Utopia: Changing Images of the Canadian West in the Nineteenth Century," *Great Plains Quarterly* 7 (Summer 1987): 181]. Francis's article continues with counter examples from later in the nineteenth century in which the Canadian Plains were portrayed with unrestrained optimism as "a utopian garden" or "a land of opportunity." But even that opportunity presented epic challenges, "where heroic individuals daily acted out a life and death drama of good versus evil on a majestic stage" (Francis, "Wasteland to Utopia," 192).

29. Daniel Cooper Alarcón, *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 40.

30. Ibid., 93.

31. Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western*, 49.

32. Powder River Jack Lee, "Tough and Wild," on *Lonesome Prairie Love* by Skip Gorman (CD sound recording, Rounder Records, 1995).

33. Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 130.

34. Robert Earl Keen, "Shades of Gray," on *Picnic* (CD sound recording, RCA, 1997).

35. Dorothy Scarborough, *The Wind* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

36. Traditional, "The Hell-Bound Train," in Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 638-44.

37. Traditional, "Hell in Texas," in Lomax and Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, 317-19.

38. Woody Guthrie, "Dusty Old Dust (So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh)," on *Dust Bowl Ballads* (CD sound recording, Buddha Records, 2000).

39. Butch Hancock, "Boxcars," on *Eats Away the Night* (CD sound recording, Sugar Hill, 1995). Hancock and his fellow band members Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore of *The Flatlanders* update this story in their 2009 album recording *Hills and Valleys*. Their song, "Homeland Refugee," spins an ironic twist on the Dust Bowl migration narrative where the narrator and family have gone bust in California on bad real estate, and thus return to the old Dust Bowl region.

40. Bob Dylan, "Brownsville Girl," on *Knocked Out Loaded* (CD sound recording, Sony, 1990).

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Traditional, "Cowboy's Life is a Dreary, Dreary Life," in Lingenfelter and Dwyer, *Songs of the American West*, 192-94.

44. Alarcón, *Aztec Palimpsest*, 72.

45. Johnny Cash, "I Walk the Line," on *The Essential Johnny Cash* (Sony, 2002).

46. Mark Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), xii.

47. Traditional, "Lonesome Valley," in *The Folksong Fake Book: A Collection of Over 1,000 Folksongs from Around the World*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 320.